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A 'MONSTER' IN HOLY GROUNDS: SAINT CHRISTOPHER THE CYNOCEPHALUS IN THE TAXIARCHES CHURCH AT MELIES OF PELION IN GREECE

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ABSTRACT:

In the Taxiarches church at Melies of Pelion, there is, among other interesting and rare wall paintings, a depiction of Saint Christopher dating from 1774. What is unusual about this painting is that the saint is depicted with the head of a dog. The common theme for representations of Saint Christopher is, as his name suggests, a tall man carrying Christ across a stream. The eastern tradition of the saint's *Vita*, refers to his origin from the race of the Cynocephali. This tradition was transferred to the west earlier than the 10th century and was transmitted by Irish monks to the British Isles. Only a couple of such depictions, however, survive there and few in the regions of the Orthodox Church, all from the 17th century onwards. By looking back on the ancient lore of the race of the Cynocephali, this article tries to identify the connection between the two iconographic traditions of Saint Christopher. The fresco is also linked to the iconographic program of the whole church as many of the themes are rare and indicate a relation, or at least a knowledge, to the west.

Keywords: 400-1499 Medieval period; iconography; teratology; monstrous races; Cynocephali; Saint Christopher; Taxiarches church.

The area and the church

The Taxiarches church (Archangels Michael and Gabriel) is located on the central square of Melies, an important village of Pelion. Melies is mentioned on travel literature especially of the beginning of the 19th century[1]. According to oral tradition, refugees from Evia inhabited the region to avoid the Turkish subjection in the 15th century. Some researchers, however, claim that the village was part of a monastic settlement since the early 15th century[2]. The laymen who worked in the monastery brought their families with them, and thus the settlement grew to a village.

The church is a three-aisled basilica and was built in 1741 as the three dedicatory inscriptions inform us, by stonemasons from Epirus. It is believed that the new church was built on top of a byzantine one, which was functioning as the cemetery church of the area[3]. It is not impressive on the outside, but its interior is fully illustrated. It is also well known for its acoustic, thanks to an interesting plan followed by the builders; they inserted 4 large jars on the inside of each of the twelve cupolas and created a system of four wells linked together with arcades under the floor. Thus, the sound is trapped inside the jars leaving no echo and the wells function as a bass[4].

The painter and the frescoes

According to an inscription on the western wall, the church was historiated in 1774. We have no written evidence of the identity of the painter. Oral tradition, however, mentions a monk from Mount Athos, called Sydkas or Syntikas (*Συντκάς/Συντικάς*)[5]. The origin of the painter is probably true, since many of the iconographic motifs can be found in the area of Mount Athos. The name, though, must be a misconception of a local painter of a similar name (Sedoukas-*Σεντουκάς*), who painted two icons for the chancel screen in 1798-

[1] Δανιήλ Φιλιππίδης και Γρηγόριος Κωνσταντάς, οι Δημητριείς, *Νεωτερική Γεωγραφία* (Vienna, 1791), p. 168.

[2] K. Σάθας, *Μνημεία της Ελληνικής Ιστορίας*, vol 2 (Paris, 1881).

[3] Μυρτώ Καμηλάρι, 'Ιεραί αναγραφαί', *Θεσσαλικά Χρονικά* 5 (1936), 64.

[4] In 2000 a concert took place inside the church playing works by Johann Sebastian Bach.

[5] Ασπασία Σακελλαρίου, *Έκφρασις του εν Μηλεαίς του Πηλίου Όρους Ναού των Παμμεγιστών Ταξιαρχών και των Αγίων Πάντων* (Athens, 2001), p. 47.

1799[6].

The interior of the church is very interesting. The church is fully decorated and has some rare illustrations for an Orthodox Church. Some of them are found in the narthex. On the eastern wall there is a scene of the Last Judgement with the Scales of Justice in the centre. On the southern wall there is an illustration of the Wheel of Time, a combination of the *rota fortunae*, the Labours of the Months and the zodiac of the West. This illustration is very rare and can only be found in three more churches of the 18th century in Greece[7]. It is full of symbolisms for the vainness of the earthly world and has meanings difficult for the today visitor to perceive, since people link the zodiac with astrology.

The main church is divided into three aisles, as mentioned above. A motif found in Mount Athos, covering the upper part of all the three aisles, is the Chaeretismoi, a tribute to Virgin Mary, which is a special service sung before the Passion on Holy Friday. It consists of twenty-four frescoes, one for each of the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, depicting scenes from the life of the Mother of God. Another interesting fresco is that of Saint Sisois, an anchorite born in Egypt in 429 AD, depicted mourning above the open grave of Alexander the Great for the vanity of the worldly matters.

Saint Christopher the Cynocephalus

Next to the image of Saint Sisois, on the north wall, is the depiction of Saint Christopher. Although the most common motif for him is a normal human carrying Christ and crossing a river[8], this painter chose another iconographical tradition. He depicts him as a Cynocephalus, a dog-headed human, in military uniform holding a long halberd. The bottom of the 140x80 cm fresco has started to fade, but the name is clearly visible on the top, on both sides of the Saint's head, *Άγιος Χριστόφορος* (Saint Christopher), in a Byzantine style. The portrayal of the saint in that way is influenced from his *Vita*: *'…και περί των ένδοξον και μεγαλομάρτυρα λέγονται τερατώδη τινά και παράδοξα· ότι τε κυνοπρόσωπος ήν τουτέστι δύσμορφος και άγριος την όψιν, εκ της χώρας των*

[6] Νικόλαος Παπαθεοδώρου, *Ο Ναός των Ταξιαρχών στις Μηλιές του Πηλίου* (Melies, 2009), p. 90.

[7] Saint Nicholas and Saint Fanourios at Tsaritsani of Elassona and Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos at Rentina of Agrafa.

[8] Christopher in Greek means 'he who bears Christ', *Χριστόφορος* < *Χριστός* = Christ + *φέρω*=bear.

τους ανθρώπους κατεσθιόντων'[9] (...for the glorious martyr they say freakish and strange things; that he was dog-faced, meaning misshapen and wild in appearance, [coming] from the land where they eat human flesh). Reprobus, that was his heathen name meaning a reprobate, was a man of a huge stature and apart from his terrifying appearance, he could not speak, but, instead, he was barking. He lived in the time of the Roman emperor Decius (*c*. 200-251). He prayed to God and an angel came and gave him human speech. After that, he went to Antioch to help the Christians, where he was also baptized and was given the name Christopher. The king feared of him and he sent two harlots to seduce him. Christopher, however, managed to convert them to Christianity. Later, after helping many a Christian and performing a few miracles, he was beheaded and became a martyr[10].

Saint Christopher, Church of the Taxiarches, Melies, Pelion, 1774

[9] *Αγίου Νικοδήμου Αγιορείτου Συναξαριστής των δώδεκα μηνών του ενιαυτού*, vol 3 (Δόμος, 2005).

[10] *Ibid.*

There are more legends behind his appearance in the Eastern Church. Some say that Christopher was a very beautiful young soldier with whom the daughter of the king fell in love. Influenced by the morals of his time and the will of his family, he begged God to keep him away from sin. Thus, God gave him the face of a dog. Another story says that due to a terrible sin he committed, as a sign of regret, he asked God to punish him by deforming him. Others claim that he asked God to disfigure him so that the other Christians would not be scandalized by his beauty. Church fathers who preserved these stories emphasize on the morality and the virtues of the saint[11]. His *Vita*, however, attributes his deformed face to his origin.

It would be interesting to examine at this point the western tradition for the life of Saint Christopher. According to Alban Butler, Christopher was a tall, strong man, native of Palestine or Syria. He was given this name because he was always carrying Christ in his heart. Butler, in his account, also gives some information on the relics of the saint[12]. Another source is the Golden Legend or *Aurea Legenda*, a collection of saints-lives composed by Jacobus de Voragine in Latin in c. 1260. It talks about Reprobus, a Canaanite of enormous height and fearful countenance who was seeking to serve the greatest king of the world. He found a king at first, but he learned that he was afraid of the Devil. He sought and served the Devil, but he then found out that he was afraid of Christ. He went out seeking for Christ and he met a hermit who instructed him in the Christian faith and baptized him. After that, he started helping people cross a dangerous stream and one day he helped Christ himself. The legend, then, reports some miracles performed by the saint in the province of Lycia. The emperor saw him as a threat and persecuted him. Christopher submitted to his martyrdom and became a martyr and a saint[13].

As it can be inferred from the comparison between the eastern and the western traditions of the life of Saint Christopher, there are some similarities: the name Reprobus-Christopher, the time and area of his actions after becoming a Christian and the incident with Christ. The references on his life before becoming a Christian, however, and on the reasons why he was converted are different. The description of his appearance is partly common; both traditions talk about a man of enormous stature and fearful countenance. In the east, this characteristic of him is emphasized by calling him a Cynocephalus. In the

[11] Παπαθεοδώρου, p. 92.

[12] Rev. Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1866), vol 7, p. 329.

[13] *Iacopo da Varazze, Legenda Aurea*, G.P. Maggioni (ed.) (Firenze: SISMEL, 1998).

western tradition, however, it is rarely mentioned that he had the face of a dog. All over the British Isles, although there are many depictions of Saint Christopher —less only than the Virgin Mary—[14], only two represent him as a Cynocephalus. These are in Cornwall and in the Isle of Man. According to Friedman, this legend was transferred to Ireland, where monks could read Greek, earlier than the 10th century, and it was then translated into Latin as well[15]. Influenced by the eastern tradition, they gave emphasis on the origin of the saint from the race of the Cynocephali and on his inability to speak[16].

Cynocephali in ancient lore

Where does the legend of the cynocephali originate from? Herodotus (485-421/15 BC) mentions them in Libya (*Histories*, 4.191.3), but the first who gave an extensive account of these people is Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek physician who lived in the 5th century BC. He talked about people in India with the head of a dog, who bark in order to communicate; they are dressed in animal skins and dwell in mountains[17]. Later, Pliny the Elder (1st century AD) in his *Historia Naturalis* referred to the story as told by Megasthenes, a Greek ethnographer of the 4th century BC, who gave the same information as Ctesias, but he also stated that their numbers come up to 120.000 (*Natural History*, 7.2.23). Claudius Aelianus, a Roman writer of the 2nd century who wrote in Greek, also talks about Cynocephali who live in India and are very swift (*On the Nature of Animals*, 4.46). Solinus, a 4th century Roman grammarian and compiler, in his work *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* was influenced by Pliny's *Historia* and copied him on Cynocephali (52.27). Isidore of Seville (*c.* 560-636), finally, in his *Etymologiae* (11.3.15) also locates them in India.

In ancient times India was where the world ended and in many maps it is drawn in the far east. Orthodox writers who wrote about the life of Saint Christopher, claimed that he came from Libya, where, according to Herodotus, among other monstrous races live the Cynocephali. Western tradition, on the other hand, cites as his place of origin Canaan, which is closer to India in reality. Bearing in mind, though, that in ancient times there was no detailed

[14] Collier, 'Saint Christopher and some representations of him in English churches', *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association* n.s. 10 (1904), 130-145.

[15] See, for example, the *Acta Sanctorum*.

[16] J. B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 72-74.

[17] Ctesias, *Histoires de l' Orient*, trans. by Janick Auberger (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1991).

distinction between various regions and India was considered to be a vast area at the end of the world, the saint could be considered to originate from the broader area of India. Furthermore, among the other monstrous races living in the same area, there were accounts of giants, such as in the Letter of Alexander to Aristotle[18]. Merging these two traditions, the compiler of the life of Saint Christopher made him a giant Cynocephalus. This story was transferred to Ireland, as mentioned above, and was then partially expanded in the west.

Conclusion

If we want to find the reasons behind this awkward tradition, then we should look at the teachings of the church about the monstrous people. Early in the history of Christianity the question as to what to do with the monstrous races arose. Are they humans? Should they be included in the ecumene and be treated as normal beings? The first to answer this was Saint Augustine, who claimed in *De Civitate Dei* that 'either the accounts of such races are false, or that they are not human, or that if they exist and are human they are descended from Adam'[19]. Isidore, then, added that monstrosities are part of the creation and not '*contra naturam*'[20]. Thus, missions were organized to these far regions in order to preach the gospel to them, based on Christ's command to the Apostles 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16.15)[21]. The compiler managed not only to include this race in God's creation, but to make one of them his delegate. He proved, in this way, that every man can be saved if he shows the proper regret for his past deeds and follows the path of Christ. Thus, it is not an intriguing thing for the believers to see an image such as this inside the holy ground of a church, but, on the contrary, it reminds them the benevolence of God and the virtue of the saint.

Back to the Taxiarches church, the painter shows a deep knowledge of the tradition of the saint, both the eastern and the western. Although the Orthodox Church refers to Saint Christopher as a Cynocephalus in written sources, his depiction as such is not a common theme. There are only few

[18] W. W. Boer, (ed.), *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1973).

[19] Valerie Flint, 'Monsters and the Antipodes in the Early Middle Ages and Enlightment', *Viator* 15 (1984), 65-80 (pp. 69-76). See also: Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. and trans. by E. M. Sanford and W. M. Green, vol 5 (London: Heinemann, 1965).

[20] *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. by Stephen A. Barney and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11.3.1, p. 243.

[21] Friedman, p. 59.

images known to us; a late Byzantine icon now in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, two Russian meta-Byzantine icons (one of them is located in the Museum of Rostov, Kremlin), one icon at the church of Saint George in Çegelköy in ancient Bithynia, Turkey, an icon of the saint together with Saint Stephen of the 18th century now in Germany, a 17th century fresco in a monastery of south Bulgaria, another fresco at the church of Agioi Anargyroi (Saints Cosmas and Damian) at Androni, Greece, two unidentified icons and an *unicum* in the church of Saint George, at Arpera, Cyprus. The latter depicts Saint Christopher both as dog-headed and carrying Christ on his shoulder, combining, thus, the eastern and the western traditions and being their link[22]. These depictions come from the 17th-18th centuries, which could mark the revival of a lost tradition, although further research should be made in other forms of art, as well, to find the connection between the written sources and the iconographic ones and their continuity. The painter of this church shows a great knowledge of many rare themes in the Orthodox Christian art and does not hesitate to include them in the iconographic program. Worth mentioning is the fact that in some of the capitals there is a foliate mask (Green man) drawn on all four sides of them. This is also a rare motif for Orthodox churches and constitutes further evidence that the painter had a connection with the west, most probably having travelled there. The temple is a proof that small, local churches can contain great wealth and the anonymous painter that posthumous fame may lie not in the name, but in the work you leave behind.

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[22] Χαράλαμπος Χοτζάκογλου, *Σκιάποδες, Στερνόφθαλμοι, Κυνοκέφαλοι: προέλευση και πρόσληψη τριών αρχαιοελληνικών τεράτων στη βυζαντινή τέχνη και η Σχολή των Θηβών* (Λευκωσία: Μουσείο Ιεράς Μονής Κύκκου, 2003).

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